

WYCOMBE WANDERERS 1, READING 2

READING'S professionalism saw them through to the third round of the F.A. Cup at Wycombe on Saturday, but the non-Leaguers came desperately close to forcing a replay.

Outplaying the Wanderers for the first half, Reading suddenly found themselves on the wrong end of an attacking onslaught throughout the second period. Thanks to sterling work from goalkeeper Steve Death and defenders Paul Bennett and Gary Peters they held onto their lead, but only just.

Ian Pearson, a striker Reading boss Charlie Hurley has watched this season on a couple of occasions, was the man who almost brought about the replay. Cracking in one superb goal, Pearson was desperately unlucky not to have notched the winner, but his fierce shot ricocheted against the post and clear.

Reading got off to the best possible start, when Robin Friday, revelling in the icy conditions, cracked in a fifth minute goal. Bennett pumped a free kick into the area, the ball ran loose to Friday, who hammered it into the roof of the net from close range.

Two minutes later, Friday was booked, when he came with a desperately late tackle on Mick Holifield. This was to be the only serious foul of the entire match, and great credit should be bestowed upon both sides.

Earlier in the day, referee Brian Homewood (Sunbury) had called in the two managers before announcing that the game was on. I understand that Reading boss, Charlie Hurley was against playing, whereas Wycombe wanted the game to go ahead.

The Reading defence, with Dave Moreline outstanding, soaked up the Wycombe pressure, but up front, Friday was playing like his former self. The flicks, ball control and cheeky turns were all there and this is good news for all Reading fans, but bad for opposition defences.

After Phillips and Fraser—playing only his fourth game of the season for Wycombe—had both gone close, Reading took the upper hand once more. John Murray and Friday combined well to send Gary Peters scampering away. His cross zipped across the face of the Wycombe goal.

However, in the 32nd minute, Reading added to their lead. Murray sent in a fierce low cross-shot, that saw goalkeeper Maskell palm the ball out. Phillips, struggling in the slippery conditions, seemed ready to push the ball back to his 'keeper, but Friday stormed in to slam the ball home.

Both Reading goals can be attributed to defensive errors, but the men from Elm Park made their opponents pay.

It was good to see Friday rediscovering his goalscoring touch, for after four games without a goal, the transfer-listed striker has found his form of old.

With Bryan Carnaby having an outstanding match in the middle of the park, Friday, Murray and Ray Hiron teasing the Wycombe defenders and Reading's defence holding firm, it looked to be the case of how many Wycombe, on the other hand, had different ideas and began to pressurise Reading.

Carnaby distinguished himself by heading behind a dangerous cross and then a gap opened for Reading schoolmaster John Priestley, but he hurried his shot and the ball ran wide of the target.

A two-goal lead looked certain to give Reading a comfortable second half, but Wycombe had other ideas and straight from the re-start attacked the Reading goal.

Birdseye stormed off down the wing and got in a good centre, which saw Carnaby head clear. Then, Priestley headed just wide from a Davies centre. Moments later, Pearson chipped in, Fraser flicked the ball on, but Death came out well to halt the move.

Just after the hour, a long kick down the middle found dangerous man Pearson, who's flick into the middle saw Kennedy hit a fierce rasping shot just wide.

Reading broke quickly from defence to attack and with a two-man advantage in a three-against-one situation looked certain to increase their lead.

However, Hiron's cross-field ball to Murray, on the edge of the area, was not controlled by Reading's top scorer and the ball ran harmlessly into the arms of Maskell.

Wycombe's almost relentless pressure had to tell and sure enough, in the 68th minute, they pulled a goal back. Davies' long ball up to the area was chested down by Kennedy and Pearson drove a glorious half volley home. Death could not be faulted. All his weight was on one foot and in the freezing conditions, it was a case of once committed, unable to rectify the situation.

Now the crowd rose to the Wanderers, but in the 72nd minute, Reading had a marvellous opportunity to assert their superiority. Murray broke away and squared the ball to Friday. It looked the ideal opportunity for the Reading striker to hit his hat-trick, but Maskell was off his line to narrow the angle, Friday shot straight at the Wycombe 'keeper, who was unable to hold the shot, but dived at Friday's feet to prevent a goal ensuing from the rebound.

Reading were now forced on the defensive and pulled back 10 defenders in front of goalkeeper Death as Wycombe powered forward for the equaliser.

Pearson, a man destined for League soccer before too long, was just wide with a far post header, then Fraser put Kennedy clear, but Death saved brilliantly and the same player was just off target with a fierce snap shot minutes later.

In the last minute, Pearson was fractionally too wide after the Reading defence had been torn to shreds, when he rattled the post with the best shot of the game.

One could almost hear the sigh of relief from Reading players and fans alike, when referee Homewood blew the final whistle. Reading were through, now for the big boys! However, they can look back on this game and feel somewhat fortunate not have been forced into a replay, for on their second half performance, the non-Leaguers deserved a second attempt.

For Reading, it was a game they should have won in much more convincing style. The notorious slope seemed to present them no real difficulties. In fact they created their own problems and almost downfall.

A word of praise for referee Homewood. He had an outstanding match, when one considers the conditions and remained consistent throughout the game.

WYCOMBE: Maskell, Birdseye, Mead, Phillips, Davies; Holifield, Fraser, Kennedy; Priestley, Evans, Pearson. Sub: Horseman (not used).

READING: Death, Peters, Moreline, Bennett, Henderson; Cummings, Stuckey, Carnaby; Murray, Friday, Hiron. Sub: Hollis (not used).

REFEREE: John Homewood (Sunbury).

ATTENDANCE: 7,700.